



National School Lunch Program

What Is the National School Lunch Program?

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or no-cost lunches to children each school day in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions (RCCIs). The NSLP was established under the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act, signed into law in 1946.

Who Administers NSLP?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the Program at the Federal level. At the State level, NSLP is administered by State agencies, which operate NSLP through agreements with school food authorities.

How Does NSLP Work?

The NSLP is operated by public or nonprofit private schools at the high school level or below. Public or nonprofit RCCIs may also participate in NSLP, and charter schools may participate as public schools. Participating schools receive cash subsidies as well as nutritious, 100 percent domestic foods known as USDA Foods for each reimbursable meal they serve. In exchange, schools and institutions must serve lunches that meet the Federal meal pattern requirements and offer them at a free or reduced price to all eligible children. School food authorities can also be reimbursed through NSLP for snacks served to children who participate in an approved afterschool program.

How Can Children Participate in Free or Reduced-Price School Lunch?

Children may be determined “categorically eligible” for free meals through participation in certain Federal assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or based on their status as a homeless, migrant, runaway, or foster child. Children enrolled in a federally funded Head Start Program or a comparable State-funded pre-kindergarten program are also categorically eligible for free meals.

Children can also qualify for free or reduced-price school meals based on their household income and family size. Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals. Schools may not charge children more than 40 cents for a reduced-price lunch. To see the current Income Eligibility Guidelines, please visit: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/income-eligibility-guidelines>.

Where Can I Go To Learn More About NSLP?

For more information, please contact the State agency responsible for administering NSLP in your State: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/contacts>.

Whom at FNS Can I Contact To Discuss NSLP?

Please contact the FNS Division of External and Governmental Affairs at fnsgovaffairs@usda.gov.

Key National School Lunch Program Data	FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019 (estimate)
Average participation (in millions)	30.5	30.4	30.0	29.6	29.6
Lunches served (in millions)	5,005.4	5,052.9	4,891.5	4,865.7	4,866.4

FY = Fiscal Year